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ABSTRACT

Although many authors have mentioned examples of how black usually connotes a negative evaluation and white a positive evaluation, the literature on the topic has not yet included an attempt to list examples comprehensively. Those which are cited here come from a wide variety of sources: primarily from dictionaries, books of slang, and personal correspondence. Four cases are cited here: black as positive and black as negative, and white as positive and white as negative. The negative associations to black and the positive associations to white may have serious implications insofar as black and white are used as short-hand symbols to denote racial membership. A reasonable expectation, on the basis of generalization, would be that they would enter into judgements of people varying in skin coloration (either one's own or that of others.) There may also be implications for individual personalities when the negative traits of a person became associated with black and the positive ones with white. Word maps are useful to the extent that they accurately reflect the territory represented. Unnecessary difficulties arise when symbols are not accurate insofar as important issues are concerned. Although symbolic functioning is of inestimable human value, psychologists and semanticists have rightly noted some limitations in the process. (Author/JM)

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Abstract

Black and white are used to convey negative and positive evaluations. Four lists of examples are presented: black as negative and black as positive, and white as negative and white as positive. Black is usually associated with a negative evaluation and white with a positive evaluation. The implications of such associations for the use of black and white as symbols for racial membership are examined.

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The Black and White Symbolic Matrix

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Although many authors have mentioned examples of how black usually connotes a negative evaluation and white a positive evaluation (e.g., Black, 1972; Cooper, 1968; Jones, 1972; Stabler and Johnson, 1972; Williams and Stabler, 1973), the literature on the topic has not yet included an attempt to list examples comprehensively. Those which are cited here come from a wide variety of sources: primarily from dictionaries, books of slang, and personal correspondence.* Decisions to omit particular examples were sometimes difficult. A decision to omit was generally made if the color usage was ambiguous or only marginally evaluative (e.g., white noise, white tone, Black Mike, black gang, etc.), if the color involved was the natural color of the object, if the usage was clearly archaic, or if the color name was associated with a food or beverage (e.g., white lady, black velvet, Devil's Food Cake, Angel Food Cake, etc.). The most salient use of the color names black and white has recently been as words to denote racial membership, but the following lists omit examples of such usage. Four cases are cited here: black as positive and black as negative, and white as positive and white as negative.

Black as positive. To be in the black is to show a profit; black-jack is a winning hand in a particular game of cards; either black earth or black belt refers to fertile soil; black robes are generally worn by school graduates and judges; black belt refers to high achievement in U.S. Judo and Karate; a dark horse is an unexpected winner; black gold refers to oil and black diamonds to coal; black box denotes any automatic apparatus performing intricate functions (e.g., an airplane's navigational equipment); the blacksmith was a much-esteemed tradesman; black-tie affairs are formal social occasions (as are also white-tie affairs); Black Betsy is a slang expression for a baseball bat; the black bottom was a lively American dance of the 1930's; and black lace is generally regarded as sensual and provocative.

Black as negative. Black thoughts, words, brows, or looks bode ill or signify hostility; either a black outlook or having a black cloud over one's head connotes pessimism and gloom; black dog refers to depression of spirits; black lies are harmful and inexcusable; black deeds are evil and wicked; black magic refers to witchcraft and magic used for evil purposes; black art refers to sorcery and necromancy; sins are said to be black; the devil is often called the prince of darkness; a Black Mass is a mass for the dead and a travesty of the Christian Mass used in the cult of Satanism; black man refers to an evil spirit, the devil, or a spirit invoked to terrify children; black cats are omens of either evil or bad luck; a black raven is thought to be ominous; a black spot is an area of trouble, anxiety, or danger; black on a map is used to

indicate such calamity as drought or enemy-held territory; a black mark on one's record indicates censure or disgrace; to put up a black is to make a blunder; a black sheep refers to a person who fails to live up to the standards of the group of which he is a member; a black list names persons under suspicion or disfavor; a black book records names of persons liable to censure or punishment; to be behind the black ball is to be at a disadvantage; black is a symbol of mourning, and widows traditionally clothe themselves in black; British judges once wore black caps when pronouncing sentences of death; black box is a slang reference to a coffin; bad news may come bordered in black; black-coat refers to an undertaker, and black work refers to the undertaker's trade; Black Pope is a disparaging reference to the head of the Jesuit order, as is the term black cat (or black coat) for a clergyman; black widow is a slang expression for an unpopular girl; black pieces have the manifest disadvantage of the second rather than the first move in checkers or chess; the ace of spades is the symbol of death (however, it is also the highest card in the game of bridge); to black out means to suppress information or news, to render inoperable (e.g., to black out a television broadcast), to lose consciousness temporarily, to forget everything about a particular event, or to extinguish or obscure lights; black humor is superficially humorous but actually macabre; the villian in television or Hollywood Westerr is often clad in black; black-eyed Susan is a slang expression (Texan) for a revolver; blackguards are low, foul-mouthed, contemptible scoundrels of the idle criminal class (the term was once applied to the

lower menials of a royal or noble household); blacklegs are swindlers, strikebreakers or, more generally, persons who break the rules of a particular trade or group; a bête noire is a person or thing to be strongly detested or avoided; Black Friday is any Friday on which misfortune occurs; a black-letter day is an inauspicious day; a Black Maria is a police wagon used for carrying prisoners, or a hearse; black markets operate in violation of legal price controls; blackmail refers to receipt of payment through intimidation or the coercion of someone into a particular action; black stuff refers to opium and black bomber to amphetamine tablets; black money refers to the concealed winnings of a gambling casino (skimming); a black bottle was, in folklore, the bottle of poison given to unwanted hospital patients; blackball refers to a secret adverse vote (a black ball was at one time used to reject a candidate in a club ballot), or to ostracize someone from society; a black eye lowers one's reputation, and a black eye also means a severe blow or rebuff; to blacken another's reputation is to defame it by speaking evil of a person's character; to blackwash someone is also to defame a person's character; to be black-hearted is to be malevolent; a black scheme is one which is contrived to wreck vengeance; a blackjack is a leather-covered cudgel, and to blackjack a person is to compel by intimidation (e.g., "The gang blackjacked him into keeping his bargain."); a Black Hole is a military lock-up or a place of imprisonment; the black flag is a signal of execution completed and also the ensign of pirates (though with white skull and crossbones); and the Black Hand was a criminal secret society, the Black Hundreds were Russian terrorists, the Black and

Tans were Irish terrorists, and the Black Shirts were Nazi Fascists.

The dictionary synonyms for black are as follows: dirty, stained, soiled, foul, dingy, dark, shadowy, dusky, murky, smoky, dim, dull, clouded, lightless, swarthy, sooty, fuliginous, smutty, muddy, and smirched; sad, depressing, somber, gloomy, sulky, doleful, dismal, discouraging, mournful, funereal, deadly, and grave; ominous, foreboding, baneful, and threatening; angry, fierce, enraged, and sour; atrocious, horrible, unpropitious, malignant, disastrous, and calamatous; sinful, sinister, fiendish, devilish, diabolical, wicked, infernal, inhuman, iniquitous, monstrous, shameful, nefarious, treacherous, denigratory, traitorous, and villianous.

White as positive. In contrast to the case of black, white lies and white magic are harmless, the white witch is a beneficient witch, a white sheep is one who behaves well among discreditable people, and a white list is a list of favored employees or establishments. Although whether one would regard the usage of white as positive or negative in the field of politics depends on one's viewpoint, it is noteworthy that a white paper is an authoritative government report; White House and Whitehall refer to government residences or offices or to high government policy, and the so-called white faction in politics has been the constitutional, counter-revolutionary, reactionary, or Royalist outlook. A white ribbon committee is one which promotes temperance and purity. Although whitewash is usually used in a negative sense, it also has the positive meanings of obtaining a fresh start by passage through bankruptcy court or of holding an opponent in a game scoreless. A white hope

(in addition to referring to a Euro-American contender for a pugilistic championship held by an Afro-American) refers to someone who can bring fame to his group. A political reformer or the champion of a cause is sometimes deemed a white hope or a white knight. A white hunter was once perceived as the glamorous guide of African safaris, but the image has become tarnished (or blackened). White meat is a slang term for an easy, pleasing task. White coal refers to water power. Whiteface refers to a circus clown. The expressions great white way (of a city) and White Christmas denote pleasant places or auspicious occasions. The white-haired, or fair-headed, boy is he who is highly favored. The ceremonial display of white at baptisms, at weddings, and at Easter signifies innocence and purity. Penitents, in Church tradition, garb themselves in white sheets when they confess their sins. White gloves were presented to the judge who finds no criminal cases to try. The use of white to denote being unstained and unblemished is clear in the use of white in hospitals and in soap advertising. The Man from Glad in American advertising is a Euro-American clad entirely in white. Movie and television heros, such as in American Westerns, are also often dressed in white. Although there has been a recent change in fashion, kitchen appliances such as washers, stoves, and refrigerators have typically been finished in white enamel. White sidewall automobile tires are popular even though they are expensive and no more functional than black ones. A white spirit is one that is pure and innocent. Angels are said to shimmer in white. To be whitehanded is to have one's hands free from evil acts (although it also has been taken as a sign of exemption from labor).

White man is American slang for a man of honorable character. A square-dealing, straightforward chap is "a white man if ever there was one." Being treated decently and in a fair ar ight manner is to be treated whitely. A white alert is the all-clear signal for a return to normalcy after a military alert. The white pieces in chess or checkers have the advantage of moving first, and the white cue ball in the game of pool has command of the table. White also means "fair," in the sense of being very blond, and blondness is generally valued by people in Western culture (Gorney, 1968). Although more ambiguous in its connotation, a white war is one which features oblique methods rather than open warfare (e.g., a white war of economics or propaganda). White collar worker refers to salaried employees, such as office workers, whose duties call for a well-groomed appearance; and it is generally positive in connotation.

White as negative. The white flag is a symbol of truce, desire for a parley, or surrender. To show the white feather or to be lily(white)-livered signifies cowardice. A white sepulcher is a hypocrite, a person who is professedly virtuous but inwardly corrupt. The word white has lately been used in the sense of not good; for example, lacking in feeling, and the phrase, "That's white of you," is usually taken to be a sarcastic reference to one's decency. A whitewash is a glossing over of evil deeds; and to whiten is to give something specious the appearance of guiltlessness. To white-ant an organization is to take it over surreptitiously as if by the boring of termites. A person may turn white-as-a-sheet or white-as-a-ghost after drinking white lightning (moonshine whiskey).

White mule, or white line, refers to cheap, bootleg gin. A white elephant is a property requiring much care and expense and yielding little profit. The least valuable poker chip is usually a white chip. A white night refers to a night without sleep. Cocaine is also called white stuff. White slavery is forced prostitution. A whitecapper is a member of a self-appointed vigilante committee which attempts to drive away or coerce persons regarded as obnoxious. Although not consistently used in a negative sense, the expressions white-with-fury and in a white heat are used to suggest a state of intense passion. For example, to be in a white heat is to be in a state of intense mental strain or activity. A white tornado is an exceptionally destructive tornado. White hot is police slang for being wanted for commission of a major crime. White is also used to refer to a pale, ashen appearance or to the condition of being drained completely of resources (e.g., being bled white financially). White is also frequently associated with very old age. And, although it is black that most often signifies death, white, too, may do so, as in the case of shrouds or ghosts.

The dictionaries have such synonyms as these for white: clean, ivory, silvery, light, bright, snowy, frosted, creamy, milky, chalky, pearly, fair, blond, bleached, blank, naked, clear, neutral, colorless, transparent, spotless, unstained, pure, unalloyed, innocent, harmless, ethical, honorable, decent, square-dealing, splendid, kind, courageous, faithful, dependable, friendly, good-natured, happy, considerate, hopeful, cheerful, beneficient, favorable, propitious, auspicious, and fortunate.

The foregoing symbolic matrix may, on the surface, seem innocent enough. There is certainly no error inherent in a preference for lightness over darkness or for white over black. However, the negative associations to black and the positive associations to white may have serious implications in so far as black and white are used as short-hand symbols to denote racial membership (Jones, 1972; Stabler and Johnson, 1972; Williams and Stabler, 1973). A reasonable expectation, on the basis of generalization, would be that they would enter into judgements of people varying in skin coloration (either one's own or that of others). Although the extent to which racial attitudes are influenced by color attitudes is difficult to assess, there is some experimental and correlational evidence of a connection (Williams, 1969, 1970; and Williams and Edwards, 1969). There may also be implications for individual personalities when the negative traits of a person become associated with black and the positive ones with white. An extreme illustration of dissociation along such lines was presented in the classic clinical report of a multiple personality by Thigpen and Cleckley (1954). One of the three personalities, called Eve White, was characterized as immaculate, demure, retiring, prudish, and almost saintly, in a stereotyped way; Eve Black, on the other hand, was characterized as flirtatious, vain, egocentric, shrewd, sexy, and playful. The maladaptive nature of dissociative processes within a personality have long been noted by psychoanalytic theorists.

Whorf has noted, "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in the kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which have to be organized in our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and describe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language." At the present time the tradition of linking black with a negative evaluation and white with a positive evaluation is deeply embedded in Western linguistic and non-linguistic customs, yet considered either as a physical or psychological description of Afro-Americans and Euro-Americans, black and white are inaccurate symbols for the reality they represent. As semanticists phrase it, word maps are useful to the extent that they accurately reflect the territory represented. Unnecessary difficulties arise when symbols are not accurate in so far as important issues are concerned. We shape our symbols, and they, in turn, shape us in our orientations and expectations in everyday life. Although it may be natural for humans to "set up an inventory of mental enclosures" (Levi-Strauss, 1964), and although symbolic functioning is of inestimable human value, psychologists and semanticists have rightly noted some limitations in the process. For example, people tend to take symbols literally. To confuse symbols with their referents, and particularly

when the symbols are misleading, is to see life "through a glass darkly," instead of "face to face." Furthermore, objects tend to be perceived in such a way that they eventually take on the meaning of their symbols (e.g., Carmichael, 1932). Symbols also tend to reduce the awareness of individual differences existing within a group bearing a single label (e.g., Katz, 1972). They may also reduce the likelihood of observing and adapting to changes in reality over time (Hayakawa, 1950). Black (1972) reported that high school students who received a six week course in language analysis and principles of general semantics showed significant decreases in measures of ethnic prejudice. Control group students or students who were enrolled in an anti-prejudice course, on the other hand, showed no decrease in such scores. The hazards of symbolization have been eloquently noted in the teachings of Zen Buddhism. "To point at the moon the finger is needed, but woe to those who take the finger for the moon." And, "The flower is not red, and the willow is not green." (Suzuki, 1949). Such teachings serve to challenge the typically dualistic thinking prevalent in Western culture. Categorizing reality in terms of black or white is perhaps the ultimate example of such thinking.

Footnote

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